

POLAR BEAR RANGE STATES' MEETING

National Conservation Training Center, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, U.S.A.
26-28 June 2007

Summary record of the first plenary session of the meeting

Morning of 26 June 2007

Chairman: Kenneth Stansell
Rapporteurs: Mary Cogliano
Timothy Van Norman

Welcoming addresses and opening of the meeting

Rick Lemon, Director, National Conservation Training Center, welcomed the delegates to the National Conservation Training Center (NCTC). He gave a brief description of the center and invited delegates to a guided tour on Wednesday, 5:15pm (gathering outside the meeting room).

Dale Hall, Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, welcomed the Heads of the delegations and staff. He recognized that this meeting was the beginning of a dialogue that should continue into the future. He stated that the recent action by the IUCN Polar Bear Specialist Group (PBSG) to reclassify the polar bear as vulnerable sent a message [Note: the PBSG reviewed and recommended this to IUCN, and IUCN made the decision regarding reclassification]. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering listing the polar bear as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

The signing of the 1973 Agreement on the Conservation of Polar Bears strengthened and formalized previous multinational dialogue on the conservation of polar bears. However, this meeting in Shepherdstown is the first consultative meeting of the Contracting Parties to the 1973 Agreement since 1981. He stated that this meeting was an opportunity to discuss the status of polar bears and the effects of pollution, habitat loss, and other factors affecting populations. Out of this meeting, he hoped that recommendations could be made at the national and international levels to help polar bear conservation. With regard to the effects of climate change, he noted that polar bears were one of the first species to be affected. However, other species and whole ecosystems will be affected. He hoped that additional meetings could be held to continue the cooperative efforts that have begun.

Mr. Hall proposed that Kenneth Stansell chair the meeting. This nomination was accepted by acclamation.

The Chairman called the meeting to order. The meeting will be held following standard rules of procedure. Decisions will be by consensus, unless there is a call for a vote by a delegation.

Delegations were also encouraged to provide a copy of their country report to include in the official summary record of the meeting. The Chairman indicated that this was a government-to-government meeting and closed to observers and the press. The Chairman also recognized the critical role of the IUCN PBSG and its scientific support for the 1973 Agreement. The Chair of the PBSG was invited to attend, but was unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts. However, he noted and welcomed the PBSG members that were present as part of delegations.

The Delegation from Norway thanked the United States for hosting the meeting. Norway agreed on the importance of the PBSB being represented at this meeting and the need to rely on the expertise of the members present.

The provisional agenda was adopted by acclamation.

Country Presentations

Canada

The Delegation from Canada thanked the United States for facilitating this meeting and the timeliness of the meeting. Canada stressed the conservation, social, cultural, and economic importance of polar bears to their country, especially for northern Canadians.

The Head of the Canadian Delegation presented the Canadian country report (a copy of the PowerPoint presentation will be distributed). The report consisted of a brief summary of the current status of polar bears in Canada, management of the species, harvest levels and management, international trade, and research priorities. The importance of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) was stressed for use in managing the species. Canada also reported on its successes in regards to polar bears and the challenges it is facing.

Canada stressed that the country has historically had a sustainable harvest of polar bears and measures are in place to control this harvest. The 1994 Amendment to the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) to allow the import of sport hunted trophies into the United States has been beneficial to Canada for polar bear conservation and economic opportunity. Canada opposes the removal of the amendment from the MMPA. Canada noted that the number of polar bears harvested would not decline due to the removal of this amendment because the polar bear take through sport hunting is part of the subsistence harvest quotas.

The Chairman opened the floor to questions.

The Delegation from the United States, in reference to population estimates of the 13 subpopulations in Canada, asked if there were any particular issues that stood out to explain differences in population trends between subpopulations.

Canada explained that the analysis of population trends was done through the Polar Bear Technical Committee (PBTC) and the PBSG using population viability analysis (software program RISKMAN), which incorporates population vital rates and harvest data. Climate

change and harvest impacts were key issues with respect to differing subpopulation trends. Identified harvest issues were being addressed.

Norway inquired about Canada's reference to opening the Arctic to resource development and tourism, and to possible time scales and relevant areas.

Canada responded that there is a possibility of natural gas and mineral development in the future. Additionally, Canada noted that if the Northwest Passage is opened in the future, there could be an increase in shipping activity. There is presently an increase in cruise ships, however, it was noted that there is not currently any significant impact on polar bears due to tourism or development.

The Delegation from Greenland asked how traditional knowledge was being collected and used in management decisions.

Canada stated that a committee on traditional ecological knowledge is looking at ways to collect data. To date, little information has been collected. In Nunavut, some reports have been documented. In addition, a governmental social science position has been created in Nunavut to collect data and will be working with the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board (NWMB) to ground-truth the information.

The United States inquired about the type and source of contaminants that Canada identified as increasing.

Canada responded that bromide flame retardants and perfluoroalkyl contaminants in polar bear tissues have been identified but not the specific sources of the contaminants.

The United States asked about specific information that would lead Canada to assign impacts of climate change to Western Hudson Bay and Southern Beaufort population declines.

Canada responded that they have information dating back to the 1960s from Western Hudson Bay showing a decline in body condition. There are also data to show that sea ice in Western Hudson Bay is breaking up three weeks earlier than in the 1970s. There has been a clear decline in population numbers from 1200 to 935. Survival rates of dependent young, subadult, and older bears have declined and were linked directly to earlier sea ice breakup. A decline in condition in bears in Southern Hudson Bay between the mid-1980s and the mid-2000s has occurred that is similar to that observed in Western Hudson Bay, although the decline cannot be directly linked to climate change at this point.

The Delegation of Russia, noting Canada's experience using polar bear meat for human consumption, asked if Canada could share any information it had on disease issues.

Canada stated that it was not aware of any disease, with the exception of trichinosis, and noted that bear meat is traditionally boiled.

Greenland

The Delegation from Greenland thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to provide their report. Greenland noted the importance of polar bears in the Inuit way of life and stated that Inuits in the north and east of Greenland could not survive without polar bears.

The Head of the Greenland Delegation presented Greenland's country report (a copy of the PowerPoint presentation will be distributed). The report consisted of discussion of the polar bear management system used in Greenland, population status, subsistence and sport hunting, research and monitoring needs, and future activities.

The Chairman opened the floor to questions.

Norway raised concerns about incomplete reporting by Greenland and availability of data to the PBSG. Greenland was asked to provide an overview of the reporting system used and how the data are reported to the PBSG.

Greenland reported on the two systems currently utilized to report polar bear takes. The first system provides specific details about the bear's sex and age, location of hunt, and other biological information. The form is filled out by the hunter and sent to the Greenland Homeland government where the information is put into a database. The second system is a more general reporting system established in 1993 to identify the number of animals taken within a year. These data are also stored in a database. The information from both systems is available to the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources and given to the PBSG.

Norway asked about the level of non-reported takes.

Greenland stated that Greenlanders live in small communities and it is easy to monitor takes and identify unreported takes. With the current quota and licensing system, everyone is aware of who is authorized to take polar bears. While some unreported takes have been observed, the larger problem is double reporting due to the nature of the reporting systems. Since individuals hunt in groups, there is the possibility of several people reporting the same take. However, with the two systems in place, these double reporting errors are easier to identify and correct.

Norway noted that the East Greenland population was thought to exchange individuals with the Barents Sea population. Norway noted the lack of scientific advice by Greenland when establishing the quota for this population, and asked for possible clarifications.

Greenland acknowledged that they did not have population data for the East Greenland population and therefore needed to rely on historical harvest statistics to establish the initial quota. Based on the available data that indicated that there had been no significant decline in harvest levels, they employed a precautionary principle by setting the quota at a lower level than the average low harvest level.

The United States asked what the primary importing countries are of polar bear parts from Greenland. In addition, it asked if unused portions of an annual quota are carried over and subsequently added to the quota of the following harvest season.

Greenland stated that Denmark was the primary importing country, along with other Scandinavian countries, but noted that specific data could be obtained through Greenland's CITES annual reports. In regards to unused portions of an annual quota, Greenland stated that there is currently no carry over to the following year, but that this is a significant issue raised by hunters. Greenland also noted that if a quota is exceeded, it will be reduced in the following year.

Canada asked if hunters were required to provide biological samples for data collection and confirming harvest reports.

Greenland stated that there is currently no such requirement, but that if needed by the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources, it could be collected.

Canada inquired about the differences between full-time and part-time hunters and how designations are made. It specifically questioned whether level of harvest was the distinction between the two.

Greenland answered that there are specific requirements to be designated a full-time hunter, including a residency period of two years, requirement of a Greenland address, and that 50% of income is generated by hunting and fishing.

Canada asked if Greenland had a description of their minimal requirements for monitoring.

Greenland stated that it currently has no exact monitoring system but that the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources has an overall hunting action plan that would require external funding to carry out monitoring. Greenland is depending on hunter information and funding possibilities for monitoring populations at regular intervals.

Russia asked Greenland to clarify how they treat sport hunting and if it was allowed.

Greenland stated that there is no trophy hunting allowed at this time or in the past. Hunters in North and East Greenland have raised the question on several occasions. The Home Rule Government has decided not to introduce it at this time. Greenland noted the lack of expertise available in Greenland to carry out polar bear trophy hunting. Currently, the ministry in charge of sport hunting is engaged in other programs and polar bear sport hunting is not a priority at present.

The Chairman, noting that the meeting was 30 minutes ahead of schedule, recommended that the morning session be adjourned and the afternoon session begin at 1:30 instead of 2:00. This was agreed.